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The Holy Communion



The Holy Communion

By

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RECTOR OF GRACE CHURCH, NEW YORK



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NOTE

THE intention of this essay is to help the communicant to feel the presence of Christ more intensely in the Sacrament. Great care has been taken to avoid any suspicion of controversy. He who presides at the feast is Christ, and the supreme gift of the feast is Christ. No word of this little book is to be interpreted as a limitation of the convictions which have

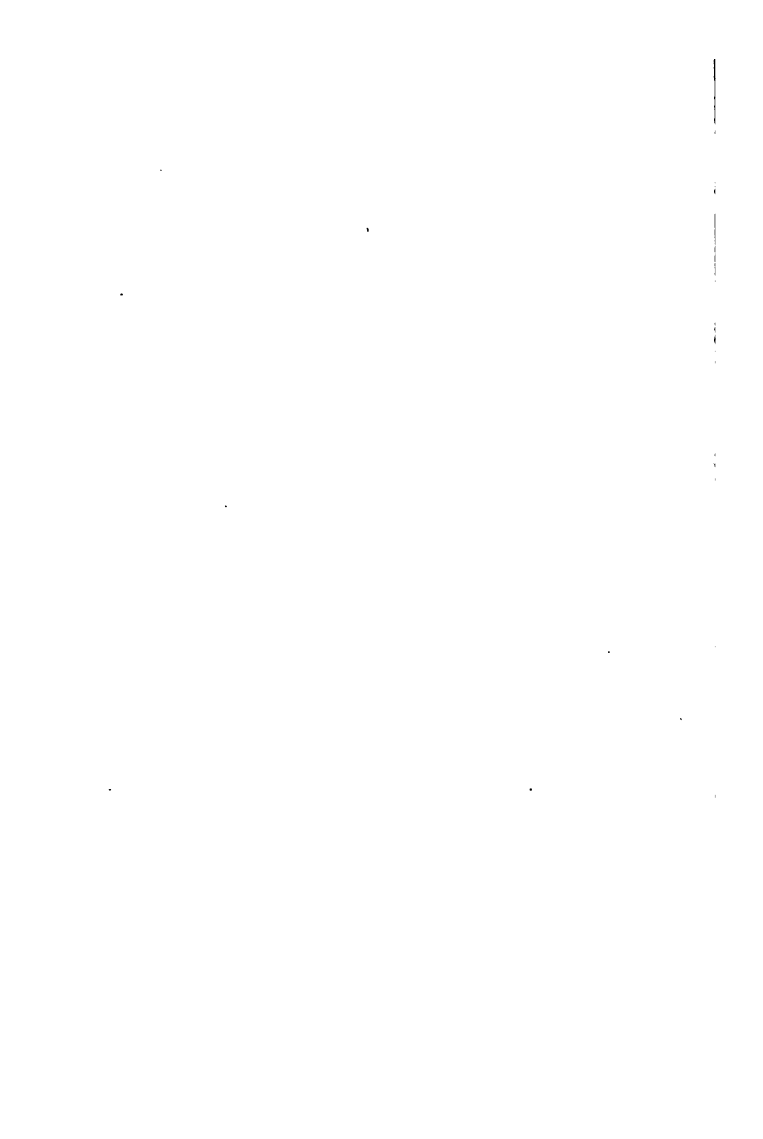
NOTE

guided devout people of every temperament in the past. There is, underlying every word, the consciousness that, when each man has said his best, and when we have all put our convictions together, there is yet a depth of meaning which has not been sounded.

C. L. S.

Lent, 1918.

The Holy Communion



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THERE are today various explanations of the Holy Communion. The explanations have arisen in the course of Church history as different elements of human feeling and thinking have entered the Church. Some of the most acrimonious discussions of which we have knowledge concern this supreme feast of love. We think of the nominalists and the realists in the

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Middle Ages; we think of Wyclif and the advocates of Transubstantiation at the dawn of the Reformation; we think of Luther and Zwingli at their conference at Marburg, when the vigorous Luther glared at his fellow reformer, pounded the table that stood between them, and shouted, "*Hoc est corpus meum.*" In our own branch of the Church we are taught that "the Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual

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manner. And the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is Faith."¹ That is, the emphasis is placed upon the spiritual; and the various theories of the past are taken up into a higher unity where we seek a practical benefit.

It is the genius of our Communion that it discriminates between essentials and legitimate difference of opinions. We all believe it to

¹ *Article xxviii. Also Book of Common Prayer, pp. 271 f.*

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be an obligation to obey the Saviour when He said, "This do in remembrance of me"¹; but we do not insist that if a man strive to win an explanation of just what he does when he receives the broken bread and the outpoured wine, he shall arrive at the exact thought which his brother has attained. He may do one of two things when he recognizes his freedom: either he may say that the Sacrament is so great a mystery that he

¹ *Cor.* xi. 24.

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will attempt no analysis; or he may say that he will study to find some interpretation which helps him more intimately to enter into the joy and inspiration of the Saviour's loving institution. Both these ways are good: one, with becoming modesty, admits the mystery which lies within all highest expressions of life (especially where man touches the divine); the other, relying on God's patience with all our feeble efforts to understand Him, is encouraged to dis-

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cover one of those "broken lights," which when blended give humanity a somewhat larger vision of the truth.

In this paper sympathy shall be accorded to the latter adventure. I shall frankly speak of an explanation which helps me, not daring to think it complete, not wishing it to displace in any reader's mind the concept which is already there. It may perhaps help to clarify the idea which has helped the reader most; or, better still, it may give him

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courage to reflect anew upon this mystery of a Master's love and to find in his own way a solution which sends him more obediently to the Holy Communion, there to find a deeper power for his daily life.

I

FIRST of all, it is wise to ascertain if more recent thought has any news to give us of the relation of the spiritual to the physical. It is increasingly clear that men are less and less inclined to draw a sharp line between the spiritual and the physical. Matter is constantly being revealed 'as a profound mystery. Atoms are no longer thought of as the smallest

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indivisible particles. Now we hear news of electrons, which are to the atom (as someone has said) as a pinhead to the dome of St. Paul's. The electron seems to be only a flash of electricity; it seems to be immaterial; yet out of its multiplied elusive, invisible force comes the reality of what we call matter. There is something here which at least suggests the spiritual. Just as we are saying that it is vicious to distinguish between the religious and the secular

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because all is religious, so we may come to say that it is vicious to distinguish between the physical and the spiritual, because all is spiritual. The obvious danger is that, in the levelling process, all seem secular, materialistic: the divine possibility is that the hills and the valleys, the angels and the stones, all shall reflect to us the light from God. In any case at the centre of the physical, as of the spiritual, is the infinitesimal quivering action, not dead but living,

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the centre and ground of being.

With this suggestion in mind, think of our Saviour's words when He broke the bread, "Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me."¹ Is it not possible that He was directing the attention of His disciples, not so much to the bread, as to the breaking of the bread? And, through this, was He not directing ultimate atten-

¹ 1 Cor. xi. 24.

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tion, not so much to His body as to the breaking of His body, the giving of His whole life in the sacrifice of the cross? In other words, at the centre of our Lord's institution we find not the static atom, but the vibrating electron: it is action, life.

We catch confirmation of this explanation in the story which the disciples who had sat down with the Saviour at Emmaus gave to their friends: He was known of them, they said, "in the breaking of the

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bread.”¹ It was His action which revealed His identity.

If this is a correct explanation we should imagine our Lord to say: “Behold, I break this bread and give it to you that on its breaking you may live. This act is my body, my character, my soul. Take this breathing act into your lives. Feed upon it. Be my act through history. Receiving the breaking of my body, do you be broken with me for the love and salvation

¹ *St. Luke* xxiv. 35.

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of men." One hesitates always to paraphrase any words of Christ, but only so can we make clear at times the full meaning that to us is enshrined in the brief record which has survived.

II

I HERE are several questions which one may rightly ask. Of these the first is, In what way is Christ present in the Holy Communion?

In general we may answer that He is present as at the Last Supper and as at the supper at Emmaus: that is, He is at the head of the Feast. We may rightly say that, as "the brightness of God's

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glory and the express image of his person,"¹ He is everywhere and always present; but there is a difference when a presence is recognized. For instance, when the disciples walked with Christ to Emmaus, their hearts burned within them because of the words the Stranger said, but when in the breaking of bread the Stranger revealed His identity, an altogether new fire of joy swept their hearts.² He had been present

¹ *Hebrews* 1. 3. ² *St. Luke* xxiv. 32 ff.

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before: He was now present with the fulness of their recognition.

Nor is this all. It is quite clear that at Emmaus there came a moment when Christ willed to be vividly present to His disciples through their recognition. Their recognition was not by chance. We perceive a faint suggestion of this increase of presence in the mutual understanding which comes to two friends in a sacredly intimate moment. A man who has seemed hard in

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his righteousness breaks down and weeps in the face of some grief, and the companion is suddenly aware of the unsuspected tenderness and love of the man. The hitherto hiding soul deliberately allows its full self to be seen. The recognition is made possible by a double process. Both friends share in it.

So, to the devout worshipper in the Holy Communion, the ministrant fades: all that is visible melts into the invisible glory. It is Christ

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who is again breaking the bread and pouring out the wine, and through these sacramental elements is bestowing upon His last disciples the same inner essence of His life and character which He gave to His first disciples in the Jerusalem upper room. He is giving the quality of Himself which we may call the will to be broken, to be poured out, that God's utter love may be known in the lives of men, and through them to others. It is not

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outward form, it is not dramatic action, it is not parable: it is contact, presence, the personal communication of divine life to human life. Old words come back to us: "He saved others; himself he cannot save."¹ . . . "For their sakes I sanctify myself."² . . . "Whosoever shall lose his life . . . shall save it."³ . . . "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay

¹ *St. Mark* xv. 31; *St. Matt.* xxvii. 42.

² *St. John* xvii. 19.

³ *St. Mark* viii. 35; *St. Matt.* xvi. 25; *St. Luke* ix. 24.

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down his life for his friends."¹
It is God's way of acting in His universe, coming down into man's bewilderment: it is failing in order to succeed; dying in order to live; being conquered in order to win the invincible victory.

It is then of first importance to appreciate who it is that presides at the Feast. It is the Word of God, God made flesh, the Son of God, God perfectly revealed in human terms, God Himself. It is He who now,

¹ *St. John xv. 13.*

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as once at the beginning, takes up bread, and breaking it says, "This is my body." The Incarnation does not stop with the individual, Jesus of Nazareth. He, the centre of the revelation, is claiming all the world as the expression of His Father. It is always, "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."¹

There is here no chance for a stupid pantheism. The loving heart, the creative mind, is not lost in His beloved

¹ *St. John* xvi. 33.

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creation; but it is there, inspiring and sustaining it. The picture can be so filled with the artist that the expert can tell whether a certain picture without a name was painted by a certain man; for him, to look upon the picture is to look, as it were, into the face of the painter. The book can be so filled with the author that the intelligent critic can fix at once the authorship of an anonymous volume; he *sees* the author. In a more thorough

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sense God may be found in His world, because not only is the fashioning of it His, but the material itself. If we may not call it His body, we may at least call it the garment which He casts about Himself. "Thou art clothed," sang the psalmist to the Lord, "with honour and majesty. Thou coverest thyself with light as with a garment."¹ It does not seem strange that the Soul of the world should take bread and break it, say-

¹ *Psalm* civ. 1 f.

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ing, "This is my body"; or, pouring out wine, should say, "This is my blood." It is the beginning of a divine lesson, whereby we may touch the garment, the blood, the body of the Lord every moment of our lives wherever we may be. Therefore we cry,

"Be known to us in breaking bread,
But do not then depart;
Saviour, abide with us, and spread
Thy table in our heart."¹

And there is more to say.
The disciples going to Emmaus

¹ James Montgomery.

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had the preparation of their walk with the Master, and all the companionship in Judæa and Galilee in the months before. For us, too, there must be preparation for seeing Christ in His Sacrament. One must begin to know Him before the breaking and the outpouring of outward pledges can reveal His presence as He stands over the divine giving of His brokenness and His outpouredness. I once knew a great preacher. He has been vanished these twenty

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years and more. But when I now read one of his printed sermons I can hear his rushing voice, I can see his kindling eye. The page seems filled with the man's presence. But I could not have that sensation had I not known him—had I not indeed heard his voice and beheld his flashing countenance.

There is, moreover, an intensity of nearness to Christ which may so come to one in the Holy Communion that one may feel the presence of

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Christ in the whole world which by Him the Father made, the divine book wherein, by those once awake, His voice, His glance, may be always recognized. If once, in a real and mystical sense, we know the presence of the Incarnate, we find Him in the flower, the sunset, the mountain, the kiss of the little child, the death of the soldier; for all proclaim to him who listens, "Let my life be broken, poured out, lost, for man's sake, for Christ's sake." There

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is found to be the golden thread of complete love, manifesting itself in a sacrifice which can come only from the heart of God, which ties all nature, all life, together in the reality of God's essential character.

Heresy comes from being satisfied with an incomplete truth. As we dare not limit the presence of the divine, so we dare not limit the sacramental presence. The Saviour's life is a constant rebuke to those who would

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build booths on mountains of transfiguration to confine His glory.¹ When people praised His mother, He extended her privilege to all who "hear the word of God and keep it"²; we may believe that He was thus describing the chief characteristic of the person who was closest to Him in love and knowledge. Again, though we know the features of Demosthenes and

¹ *St. Mark ix. 5 ff.; St. Matt. xvii. 4 ff.; St. Luke ix. 33 ff.*

² *St. Luke xi. 28.*

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Cæsar, both of whom lived before Jesus of Nazareth, we know nothing of the Saviour's face. This is not accidental. Glimpses of His face we catch, now and again, as we see the illumined countenances of men, women, and children, who in self-forgetfulness are doing His will. We cannot, further, identify the exact places where Christ was born, or died, or rose again. Only one or two spots in His whole earthly career can be fixed with any assurance. This too

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is no accident. It is surely part of His purpose that men should not limit sacred places to a few narrow walls in Palestine. By His Incarnation the whole world has been touched with His glory. These spots which knew His footprints are sacred. But through them, and in them, every earnest household is as the home of Lazarus, open to receive the Master as its welcome guest; every illness, every temptation, every joy, is reason for expecting an-

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other Capernaum, another Gethsemane, another Olivet. Through the broken bread and the poured out wine Christ gives His broken body, His poured out blood. And doing so He begins a process by which those who are His may and do receive Him in every detail of the humble and ordinary day. He is known of them in breaking bread, but does not then depart. He is theirs in all places for ever.

III

A PRACTICAL question which must often be asked is, How can we know that we have worthily and indeed received the body and blood of Christ in the Holy Communion? This question, if rightly answered, will reveal still further the nature of the Sacrament.

A good many people would perhaps be satisfied if after the Holy Communion they

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felt the sense of peace, of harmony, of joy, which the lifting of the heart to the Highest would naturally inspire. One comes away from converse with a noble friend with the glow of exultation; one dwells for hours and days upon the splendour of his various qualities expressed in that conversation. How much more must one be triumphant in the contemplation of the supreme communion of spirit with Spirit. But such a result may be self-

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complacent, narrowly loving only its own, pleased to have a companionship which is exclusive.

Others, by a deeper experience, will have come to the Lord's Supper, in the marriage garment of penitence.¹ They will have examined themselves, will have discovered their inadequate strength, and will have asked of the Lord the assurance of His forgiveness. To come away from the Feast convinced that the Lord has

¹ *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 241.

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turned and looked upon them, as once He turned and looked upon Peter,¹ to be convinced that He still trusts them, still believes in them, still hopes for their victory—is a blessing which goes far beyond any pleasant assurance of peace and contentment. They have received a gift, the gift of the Master's own presence, and in the strength of that presence they will go many days, craving and living the best life God will show them how to live.

¹ *St. Luke*, xxii. 61.

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Others will climb higher still. They will remember that the Church is called the body of Christ¹; and through the Holy Communion they will enter a new experience of brotherhood. They will count that reception of the Sacrament most sacred, not when they have been with one or two congenial souls, but when they have knelt with all sorts and conditions of men, and have felt the glow of a relationship

¹ *Rom.* xii. 5; *1 Cor.* xii. 27; *Eph.* i. 22 f.; *iv.* 12; *v.* 30; *Col.* i. 24.

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which includes all humanity, because for all humanity Christ broke His body, that He might be found in His new body, the Church. One who has really and worthily received the body of Christ will go from the service to find Christ smiling upon him, encouraging him, rebuking him, in the faces of his fellow-worshippers; for they all—joined together with the innumerable company of His brethren past, present, and to come—make up Christ's Pres-

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ence for all the world to see and to be comforted in. An essential, in approaching the Feast, is "to be in charity with all men"¹; a sign, in coming away, that we have indeed been fed, is to have that charity illumined with its interior meaning—to know that in loving men we are loving Christ Himself.²

But even this, high as it is, is not the full proof that "the

¹ *Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 230, 241, 272. Cf. *St. Matt.* v. 24; *1 John* iv. 20, 21.

² *St. Matt.* xxv. 40.

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Body and Blood of Christ . . . are spiritually taken and received by the faithful in the Lord's Supper."¹ Our Lord said, "By their fruits ye shall know them."² It is by "fruits" that we know who have verily and indeed received the body and blood of Christ. We pray to be "made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him."³ The end of the Holy Communion is

¹ *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 271.

² *St. Matt.* vii. 16.

³ *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 236.

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that we may be so filled with Christ that we shall go out into the world to be Christ among men. It is nothing less than that. We would feed on His very soul till His Spirit becomes fused with our spirit; we would think His thoughts after Him; we would walk in His steps and do His deeds. The overwhelming emotion may seize us; the clear light for a new start may shine upon our road; we may recognize a radiant fellowship thronging the way; but

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there is more: we have in us a new life, a new character, with which to go forward. We are filled with Christ.

And how shall we know this? Only when we perceive that it is our character to break our bodies and to pour out our blood, with a perfect self-forgetfulness, for the people and for the causes which we conceive to be dear to Christ.¹ When Hannington was dying, having given all for the Africans, who mis-

¹ 1 *John* iii. 16.

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understood him, he reached out for a blade of grass and for a little muddy water, saying, "This is my body. . . . This is my blood," and fed, indeed, we must believe, upon Christ. Thereupon he died for those for whom Christ had died once for all. In him the love of Christ gave itself afresh. I asked a man who risked his life day after day upon the battlefields of France if he had fear as death surrounded him on all sides. "No," he answered; "I was

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so possessed by the greatness of the cause that I almost longed to give my life to prove how much the cause was worth: I wanted to make the sacrifice." It is told of another that when he was stricken down by a double wound, and was left dying, his comrades, rushing by, heard him singing a marching song, for their encouragement and his own joy. As he sang he gave his life to God. Do we not catch in such instances an echo of the comment,

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“For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross”¹? Someway the body and blood of Christ are in such men. They are in Him, and He is in them. There is no dogged necessity driving them on: the divine character expressed in the broken bread and the poured out wine possesses them altogether. They stand at the centre of the universe with God, and see life whole; and being lost, they are found eternally.

¹ *Hebrews* xii. 2.

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We are likely more and more to think of God as Action, Will, Character. It is a return from excellent philosophy and theology, which defined God in terms of substance, to the foundation which we find in the New Testament, where God is defined as Love.¹ There we see Him in Christ manifesting a Character which willed love and did countless deeds of love. People did not understand then; they are only

¹ 1 *John* iv. 8.

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slowly and dimly understanding even yet. The divine Lord is not resting, demanding that He be served¹; He Himself is ever serving, kneeling down to wash the disciples' feet.² His character is brokenness of body for love's sake, the pouring out of blood, also for the sake of love.

The joy of the world will come when all men discover that the only happy way to live is to have God's character,

¹ *St. Mark* x. 45; *St. Matt.* xx. 28.

² *St. John* xiii. 3 ff.

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through Christ, fused with theirs, so that, feeding upon Him they will never cease to be united with Him in a service where every man gives himself unselfishly for others till all the world is the Body of Christ, and the Kingdom of Heaven is fulfilled.

